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Beirut blame stirs political fingerpointing

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WASHINGTON — The issues of who bears responsibility for the latest bombing of a U.S. outpost in Beirut and for the quality of U.S. spying have grown into the latest presidential campaign flap.

President Reagan touched off the controversy by noting "near destruction" of the Central Intelligence Agency "in recent years, before we came." And he suggested the CIA's inability to gather intelligence contributed to the bombing.

Reagan later said his remarks — made Wednesday in Ohio — were "distorted" in press reports. Networks replayed his speech Thursday night to rebut his charge.

Former President Carter said Thursday that Reagan's comments were "insulting" and "completely false," and that the bombings "had been brought about by (Reagan's) deeply flawed policy and inadequate security precautions."

Two Americans were killed in a blast last week at the U.S. Embassy annex, which echoed similar bombings last year at the old embassy and at a Marine headquarters building.

Joining the fray:

■ Democratic rival Walter Mondale, who said Reagan should "stand up and say he is responsible."

■ Carter's CIA Director Stansfield Turner, who denied making cuts in overseas agents.

Reagan press spokesman Larry Speakes strongly denied Reagan was blaming Carter.

"The president was discussing a decade-long trend," Speakes said — a period that would cover the Ford administration when Vice President George Bush was CIA director.

However, Reagan aides said after the speech the president was referring to the Carter administration.